

The Cree School Board experiment in Northern Québec: an eco-systemic review on curriculum and performance.

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to examine the factors which may explain the difficulties Cree students are facing within school in its present format. This examination draws on an extensive review of the literature, interviews and questionnaires to highlight four potential factors which impact upon achievement and progression of native Cree young people. It concludes that while there are sub-factors which may be peculiar to the geography and culture of the Cree Nation, there are broad similarities with characteristics associated with young people with Social Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD) in mainstream schools in western cultures.

Introduction

Historical context

The James Bay Crees, or Eeyouch, were encountered by the second wave of European trappers as they ventured inland from the James Bay with the Hudson's Bay Company landing in James Bay in 1668 (Frenette, 1988). With the development of the fur trade, from this point on Cree culture developed its own very specific dual lifestyle between bush and trading posts (Niezen, 1988) with summer months spent in camps in close proximity of the trading posts (Francis and Morantz, 1983), falls in "goose camps" set up along the James Bay coast (Niezen, 1998) and winters on the traplines, in isolation on the families' hunting territory (Frenette, 1985). This "dual" lifestyle has been maintained through the centuries and the Cree have become apt at handling the movement from forest to settlement and at deciphering non-native expectations while their survival remained firmly based on forest activities (Niezen, 1998).

Cree land escaped European interest as fur trading expanded to the West until 1911 when settlers started competing with Cree hunters further north (Gnarowski, M. 2002). The exclusion of non-natives from trapping with the imposition of beaver quotas in the 1930s (Niezen, 1998) restored fur-trading relations to a situation where Cree hunters once again exercised sole control over their traplines (Scott, 1988) but it also marked an increased Federal involvement into Cree affairs, particularly in terms of administrative presence within settlements. Summer day schools organized by missionaries were progressively replaced by Federal residential schools (Gagnon & Rocher, 2002) and their inherent assimilation agenda is well documented (Indian and Northern Affairs, 2004; Nichols, 2005; Indian Residential School Resolution, 2006; Bonspiel, 2006).

Ironically while uprooting them from their cultural heritage, the residential schools also provided a generation of Cree youngsters with the very tools necessary to elaborate a new

radicalism against the occupants of their land (Gnarowski, 2002). As the dispute over the building of the hydroelectric complexes erupted in 1971, it is the residential school alumni who triggered the negotiations which eventually brought about the James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement in 1975. Article 16 of the James Bay and Northern Québec Agreement (Indian and Northern Affairs, 1993) established a new body, the Cree School Board (CSB), and granted it the funding necessary to carry out its mission. The school board was formally constituted under the Quebec Education Act in 1978 and 1978-79 was the first official school year under the new board. The Cree School Board, developed under the terms of the James Bay Agreement in cooperation with the Ministry of Education Quebec, in many ways retains the structure of non-native school boards in the south of the Province.

Geographical context

Nine communities, at present, form the Cree nations: four inland communities and five Bay area communities (Gnarowski, 2002). There are negotiations for the incorporation of a tenth community, to the South of the existing communities (Bonspiel, 2002). There are schools in each of these communities, administered independently by a Head as well as parents committee; the parents committee has a consultative role in the hiring of staff and the administration of the school. At school board level, each Cree community appoints or elects one Cree person to act as a School Board Commissioner. The Board is comprised of these Commissioners. There are variations in size amongst these schools and some specialize in the primary or secondary sector, as is the case in Waskaganish, while others are 'all age'. Certain schools also offer Adult Education as a separate service but from the same premises. Each Head remains autonomous in matters of teacher selection and pedagogical supervision (Cree School Board, 2006).

Ethnological context

It is important in order to understand the concept of "education" within the Cree culture to seize its characteristics in terms of "community". Apart from summer months spent close to trading posts, Cree populations traditionally did not and still do not adopt western concepts of "structured" social organisation or hierarchies, although they are ruled by their own complex cynegetic cycles and practices focused primarily on a specific activity such as a caribou hunt (Frenette, 1985). These "macro-groups" are assembled solely for the exploitation of a resource or the practice of a religious activity. This loose and pragmatic connection was the basis of exchange at all levels until the 1970s and made any notion of "within classroom" education in a year long format both unfeasible and undesirable.

Concepts of property are also widely different in Cree culture and this bears impact on the Cree notion of competence and education. Occupation of land is not based on proprietary rights (Niezen, 1998) and Cree culture is more concerned with rights and obligations and conceives land ownership in terms of "stewardship" and "sharing". A tallyman (uuchimaau) is the person responsible for the supervision of the hunting territory and for the coordination of activities on the trapline and "stewardship" is

inseparable from recognition of competence in Cree men (Scott, 1988). In terms of “teaching”, infancy is characterized by parental indulgence and manifestations of affection (Preston, 1979). Quickly though boys are encouraged to follow their fathers on hunting trips and by age eight most would traditionally have achieved a level of autonomy in the bush, a rite of passage symbolised by the ceremony of the walk (Tanner, 1979; Visitor, 1999). Subsequent education is done in terms of slow apprenticeship, through the observation of adult activity, until a level of competence within the peer group is achieved (Preston, 1979; Frenette, 1988). The passage to full hunter status is symbolised by the ceremony of the first kill.

While ethnological considerations bear impact on Cree notions of education, explicit reference must also be made to the principles of equal access to education between the sexes appearing in the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and the Quebec Charter of Human Rights and Freedoms which will have to be incorporated for any concept of traditional education to be viable. This seems to be addressed in the philosophy statement of the Cree School Board (Cree school Board, 2006)

Current concerns

The Cree School Board statistics cumulated for cohorts 1992 to 1998 show a drop out rate situated at approximately 88% over the nine schools, irrespective of geographical location or school size – which varies widely from approximately 300 to over 1000 for Mistissini and Chisasibi. Eighty five students graduated from secondary in 2006 through the nine schools. Absenteeism has varied between 16.4 and 21.3 per cent over the last six academic years, the latter figure being that for 2005/06. This represented 30 days of absence on 139 school days for the last academic year (Cree School Board, 2006). It seems necessary to review the curriculum, in its present form, and to throw light on the factors which might explain why the needs of Cree children are not being met by the school system and why secondary education in particular does not lead to positive learning outcomes. The opening of the Accelerated Christian Education school in Mistissini in Fall 2006, a fee paying alternative, illustrates the discontentment of certain Cree parents towards the Cree School Board and its performance in its present form (Bonspiel, 2006). Allegations of within school racism and an enquiry in Mistissini by the Quebec Human Rights Commission which took place in 2004 further stress Cree concerns about performance and teaching conditions (Bonspiel, 2006). The Cree School Board has been undergoing a constant re-evaluation over the last two decades in a manner eco-systemic in nature, in that it accepts that the factors for poor performance may be wider than the schools themselves and thus solutions will have to involve communities and Cree society as a whole. As Cooper, Smith and Upton explain (1994):

“systemic theories have been advanced which seek to understand behaviour problems in schools in terms of the interactions of the persons involved, either within school situation or in related contexts such as the family of the pupil concerned, the staff group etc.” (p.25)

Review of existing literature

There are four working hypotheses which can be and have been raised when attempting to evaluate the causes of low performance in native students within formal style classrooms: language of instruction, post-colonialist mechanisms, issues of tradition and the rejection of sedentary lifestyle.

Language policy issues

Much of the literature points towards the benefit of teaching native students in their language. First, language is not used in the same ways for communication in Cree society as it is in non-native exchanges (Darnell, 1984) and teaching should therefore attempt to reach children through their own communication patterns. Secondly, research suggests that instruction in the native language is conducive to a higher degree of self esteem in native children (Bell, Amderson, Fortin, Ottoman, Rose, Simard & Spencer, 2004). The experimental foundation for such theories was established in the Cree Nations themselves when the Cree Way Project was put in place in the community of Waskaganish in the early 70s, allowing Cree students to be taught in Cree (Feurer, 1990). The data from this study has been reviewed by linguists and anthropologists since, who argue for re-introducing native first language teaching as part of instruction (Burnaby, Mackenzie, Salt, 1999; Raham, 2004; Bostic, 2005). More recently a large scale study into native schools within non-native school boards in Western Canada yielded similar results and equated academic performance with self-esteem and the schools' commitment to reviving instruction in the native language of the communities (Bell et al., 2004). The Cree School Board has long ago adopted the Cree Language of Instruction Programme (CLIP) which has been systematically applied at primarily level, with a progressive introduction of French and/or English in the early years of secondary. It may seem contradictory to be raising the language policy issue as working hypothesis for low performance. It is however an argument which is raised within the community itself (Bonspiel, 2006).

“Total institution” syndrome and post-colonialism

The literature shows a lack of match between native student and the often non-native teacher within Cree schools. Niezen (1998) points out how federal residential schools established themselves as “total institutions”. In this respect he draws on Goffman's theory of global institutions (1959):

“Total institutions do not really look for cultural victory. They create and sustain a particular kind of tension between the home world and the institutional world and use the persistent tension as strategic leverage in the management of men”.

Niezen draws a parallel between the control which was exercised by non-native teachers in residential schools and the feeling of helplessness and submission experienced by patients in mental institutions. Bérubé (1994) further observes that the mechanisms of “total institutions” may not have completely disappeared from the modern day classroom.

Behavioural models, similar to that illustrated by Haney, Banks & Zimbardo (1973), or group identity and group preference theories (Tajfel, 1970) also come into play between non-native teachers and native students, irrespective of what good pedagogy might dictate, particularly in situation where teachers are uprooted and isolated.

Post-colonialism describes the period following the passing over of power in colonised states to rulers born and bred in these territories themselves (Ahamad, 1995), which aptly defines the current ascension of the class of negotiators having achieved recognition of Cree interests post-1970 (Niezen, 1998; Gnarowski, 2002). The prefix “post” in post-colonial also suggests a change in power structure after the end of the regime of colonialism but often also indicates a continuum in practices (Chakrabarty, 1992; Spivak, 1990). The hypothesis that practices in education established in the old order have been maintained in the new must be considered (Kumar, 2000).

Traditions and culture

The importance of hunting and fishing traditions and retaining these traditions within Cree culture has been well documented (Felt, 1995; Tsuji, L.J.S., 1996). Western classroom based education reduces the time available for the transmission of essential bush skills. These were based principally on participant observation (Preston, 1979) and apprenticeship in the bush itself (Ohmagari, K. & Berkes, F., 1997). Observing the transmission of 93 bush skills amongst native women, the researchers found that over half were no longer being transmitted to young women when they were being formally educated. There have been attempts to remedy this phenomenon in native communities both within the schools with the introduction of Cree cultural programmes (Alberta Education, 1989) and within the communities themselves with the intervention of elders (Rou  , 2006). The mission statement of the Cree School Board states:

“The Cree language and culture are the root of the Cree education system

We believe that the Cree child:

*Has the right to be taught and practice his or her culture and its value system;
(...)*

*Is to be provided the opportunity to follow any level of academic, technical,
vocational and Cree traditional education.”* (Cree School Board, 2006)

The hypothesis that the Cree School has not successfully retained the transmission of Cree heritage within the curriculum needs to be addressed.

Nomadic parameters

Research suggests that traditional Cree culture was never based on principles of close proximity within an established western style social structure (Frenette, 1988; Niezen, 1998). Preston (1979) notes a distinct lack of integral social structures amongst Cree populations. It is argued by Niezen (1998) that far from submitting to the process of cultural assimilation, the Cree are

“people who have largely succeeded in defying such a pattern of cultural homogenization, at least for the present and foreseeable future”. (p.2)

This applies particularly to western concepts of sedentary living. Even the concept of belonging to a “community” depends more on Western classification methods and definitions established in the Indian Act than on a true attachment to a geographical location such as trading posts (Frenette, 1988; Gagnon & Rocher, 2002), mere temporary meeting places between native and non-natives (Francis & Morantz, 1983). Niezen (1998) emphasizes that sedentary living is not readily accepted in Cree communities when he examines in particular the phenomenon of “social pathology” which followed the forced relocation of the Fort George families to Chisasibi. He also sees the requirement for children to attend school as a key element in compliance with relocation. Many Cree families however retain hunting and fishing camps in spite of post-1970s efforts to establish forced settlements (Felt, 1995). This semi-nomadic lifestyle will have clear repercussions on performance and absenteeism of children in schools; the requirement for school attendance will also be experienced by some parents as a threat to their ability to move freely and a constraint on their chosen lifestyle. A parallel can be seen with issues currently being researched in relation to the education of “traveller children” in the UK and Europe (Padfield & Jordan, 2004; Yorkshire Museums, Libraries & Archives Council, 2005; European Monitoring Centre on Racism and Xenophobia, 2006).

Methodology

Eco-systemic evaluation methods

Methodological choices have been made in order to identify the main factors which might explain the poor performance of students within schools of the CSB. The fundamental eco-systemic notion is that behaviour and performance are better understood within the context in which they take place (Cooper et al., 1994). This theoretical model also implies a willingness to evaluate the full scope of the child’s systems in order to determine where “lack of fit” between child and environment may be occurring. Eco-systemic methods of evaluation were chosen for this project in the sense that questionnaires, both quantitative and qualitative, led interviewees not merely onto matters of classroom performance and behaviour but also scrutinized perceptions and experiences with regards to school management, administrative procedures, parental involvement, community response, involvement of Elders, traditions, historical context and socio-economic reality.

Visits to the communities and observation

Over a period of nine months, six of the nine communities were visited for the purpose of this paper. All four inland communities were visited together with two of the five James Bay communities. The communities of Waskaganish and Eastmain were not visited as no response was obtained from the respective heads of schools. Wapmagoostui was not included in the study because of its extreme geographical remoteness and the

impossibility of travelling to the community by road vehicle. In all other cases, the community was visited, a school visit was made to the secondary school and in certain cases, classes were observed.

Qualitative interviews

Qualitative questionnaires were used to survey past and present administrators and heads of the Cree School Board. A total of 18 interviews were carried out over the duration of the study, three of these involved a native interviewee. A further 4 interviews were carried out with native members of the communities who were not involved in the School Board but had spent extensive periods of time in the communities in various capacities. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. Semi-directive questionnaires were the basis of this part of the study. Fewer heads than originally contemplated were interviewed as the turnover within the period of study proved to be considerable, those not leaving the school board being rapidly promoted to senior administrative positions.

Quantitative interviews

It was originally hoped that a fully directive quantitative questionnaire would be disseminated amongst teachers during school visits. This proved difficult as access to specific teachers was often limited during visits while classes were in progress. It was decided that the questionnaire would be passed in written form to the teachers through the heads. Again this process proved to be difficult, in spite of support from the Supervisor of Schools, due to the substantial change amongst heads of school over the duration of the research project. Each head is autonomously responsible for the hiring and supervision of teachers within each school and there could be no substitute to a formal authorization from each head in this process. This was not always forthcoming. The quantitative questionnaire was fairly long (47 questions) and required at least an hour of time to complete. Retrospectively, it is judged that this was in all likelihood also an obstacle to obtaining a greater number of completed questionnaires. The quantitative questionnaire also carried a warning that completion of the questionnaire amounted to the giving of formal informed consent although it also allowed the teachers to remain anonymous. In total, comments from 13 teachers were collected, two of whom were native. During some visits, and some classroom observations, teachers who were met face to face offered comments beyond the parameters of the questionnaire itself and these were then taped and used qualitatively.

Methodological considerations

Several ethical issues became apparent during the course of the research project:

(i) A concern over ethnocentrism has arisen in the format of the study. It became quickly apparent that response from native interviewees to the questionnaires was poor and limited in scope. It is felt that ethnologically semi or fully directive questionnaires may be ill adapted to interaction in Cree culture. This is highlighted by Darnell (1984) who suggests that language does not have the same status in native culture and that any research project within this culture will confront this inherent difficulty. Two native

administrators did not meet for an interview following their initial acceptance. Two Cree Heads of school did not respond to offers to meet for an interview. One Cree administrator expressed anxiety at the prospect of the interview to her supervisor. With more emphasis within Cree society on silence than speech within social interaction, a weariness of direct eye contact and direct questions (Darnell, 1984), research interviews may have to be led in a dramatically different manner and over much longer periods of time to bear fruit. Observation, centered or comprehensive interviews and practices inspired by ethno-methodology (Garfinkel, 1967) may be preferable in future research.

(ii) Data collected from teachers only has a limited validity within this study. Not only was the process of data collection less than systematic due to difficulties experienced in gaining access to teaching staff, but it is also felt that the complete control the respective Heads of school exert over hiring, assessment and supervision might have led to forced outcomes in terms of willingness or refusal to participate in the study. It is also ethically unclear whether a bias may have existed or not in the selection process the Heads used when disseminating the questionnaires to staff. It is also felt the ratio of native to non-native teachers who participated did not reflect the ratio which currently exists within CSB teaching staff.

(iii) Furthermore, it is arguable that administration staff, while on the whole willing to participate, may be seen as having their own understanding of performance issues and predetermined explanations for these. Teachers' perceptions of the dynamics which lead to issues in performance, on the other hand, may be tinted by their own motivations, classroom experiences or ethnicity. It is felt that, although this was not possible within the framework of this study, an investigation of students' and parents' perceptions and experiences is highly desirable in any future research.

(iv) It has been remarked by several interviewees that Cree culture was a "no blame" culture and that it was very rare of members of the community to indulge in "finger pointing". Pushed to its logical consequence, this is seen by many as the reason why so little formal assessment or evaluation has been carried out in relation to past initiatives and practices within the Cree School Board (CSB). This is somewhat counterbalanced by the clear commitment the CSB makes in its mission statement to scrutiny and good practice but may still constitute a partial cultural hurdle to effective research which must have affected this project to some degree.

Findings

We found a general willingness on the part of Pedagogical Services to look at the effects of the community, the school, or family structure on classroom behaviour and academic performance. If one considers the mission statement of the Cree School Board it is also very much student centered and incorporates principles in line with the ARC (Accept, Respect and Changed) policy developed in certain western school systems (Ali, Best, Bonathan, Bower, Cardwell, Craik, Daniels, Dooner, Holland, Holmes, Kingsley, Lake, McLaughlin, Martin, Peatfield, Snowden, Vickery & Williams, 1997).

The CLIP programme

Most respondents generally accepted that the CLIP program is producing satisfactory results at primary level. It was noted by teachers and administrators that this leads to added confidence in youngsters. There seems however to be both doubt and confusion when it comes to considering (i) the desire – if any – to extend the CLIP program to the end of secondary five (to age 16-17); (ii) the way students re-integrate French or English classrooms at the end of the CLIP program in secondary one or two (age 11 or 12). The criticism was regularly made that French or English is introduced in secondary one to five not as a second language as should be the case, but as a first language of instruction. It seems unavoidable that low performance will emanate from the requirement for students to meet standards in a language that has not, up to that point, been their language of instruction. There is a paucity of research on assessing the way students transfer skills from the acquisition of Cree into the learning process in English or French. Other interviewees suggested that the weakness of the CLIP programme may lie in the format and standards of the Certificate in Cree Literacy Education, the part-time teacher training programme offered within the communities. Some respondents suggested that the programme is allowed to be excessively “thinned out” by being extended over too many years of sporadic study and attendance. It is also suggested that applicants may be of poor standards at the start. One interviewee felt that teachers were at times only one or two years ahead of their students in terms of literacy and mastery of the written language. Rahan (2004) writes:

“Until aboriginal languages are accepted by all provincial education authorities for high school graduation credits and by universities in fulfilling second language entrance requirements, a continued shortage of Aboriginal students entering teacher training programs fluent in their own language may be anticipated”.

The same situation seems to hold true for the James Bay Cree communities.

Finally it is argued by some that the content of the course itself may not be satisfactory or providing trainee teachers with sufficient bases for teaching, in light particularly of the relative difficulty that acquiring a written knowledge of Cree grammar represents. One interviewee suggested that the lack of credibility felt by many parents towards the value and standards of the Certificate in Cree Literacy Education might have far greater impact on their attitude to the schools than the historical impact of the residential schools

Research is required to examine the CLIP programme affects on language acquisition and how best to transfer those skills to other languages or other learning processes. This is both a fascinating and rich area for research and improvement, one that might benefit indigenous teaching and language acquisition programme in other parts of the world. As Rahan (2004) explains, with regards to Western Canada generally:

“More in-depth and quantitative research is needed to obtain a robust understanding of effective practices and approaches in the delivery of literacy and language instruction for Aboriginal students”. (p.12)

Teacher attitudes in the classroom

More than simply a post colonial attitude or manifestation of the dynamics of “total institution”, respondents thought that the sometimes poor engagement skills of non-native teachers could be explained in two ways: (i) For the older members of staff, it could be explained by a desire to adhere to a more traditional format of teaching now not actually in line with the Quebec Education Plan (QEP). Here training and past experience in other school boards could be seen as the cause of the lack of flexibility which in turn seemed to then alienate students. (ii) In other cases, although these younger teachers had received a much more recent training, probably more in line with the QEP, it was perhaps that their age led them to manifest insecurities when first faced with challenging behaviours so soon after completing training. Pedagogical services explained that a new teacher mentoring programme was in early stages of conception; the benefits of such a programme have been documented elsewhere in Canada (Fantilli & McDougall, 2007).

It was also felt that the motivation factors of non-native teachers should perhaps be scrutinised. There is little research available at this stage into the motivation factors that come into play when non-native teachers apply for positions in the CSB. There is little doubt however, in the mind of most interviewees, that the motivation may, too often, be either (a) a desire to take on the rather insurmountable goal of helping others; or (b) the desire to take a respite from their own emotional history. Pedagogical Services confirmed that there was a desire on their part to perhaps look back and “profile” the ideal non-native candidate in an attempt to weed out motivations that were not conducive to the establishment or development of good skills of engagement with the students. The benefits of such an analysis would be two fold: (i) it might help to achieve some form of profiling and the exclusion of teachers from the pool of applicants; and (ii) it might help identify the qualities and skills which allow a non-native teacher to be highly efficient and well adapted in this context.

Tradition and culture

Respondents overwhelmingly felt that traditional skills acquisition within the classroom needs to be enhanced. They indicated that two hours a week of “Cree culture” teaching is not a sufficient amount of time to be allocated to such a crucial part of the learning process. Respondents also suggested that the Cree teachers currently involved in providing the Cree culture classes are sometimes ill equipped themselves to provide the knowledge required, as tradition and knowledge are quickly lost or eroded. It is suggested that the idea of a “Cree culture certificate” which would be offered in partnership with a university in the south would be both desirable and possible. Efforts have also been made over the past few years to compensate for the lack of heritage training in classroom by placing the emphasis on teaching activities carried out in the bush itself.

Considerable efforts and resources have been channelled for example into setting up the Anischechistinhimaachewin Alternative Education Program, a pilot project set up in 1999 and remained in place until 2004. There is little doubt, in most interviewees’ mind,

that although a closing and exhaustive report was never formally produced, many benefits were brought about by the project which consisted in sending students with behavioural issues into hunting camp situations where they were taught academic subject and bush skills by a teacher and mentor. The programme targeted severe behaviour problems, low self-esteem, poor attendance, social maladjustment and slow rate of academic success and over the 5 years and catered for 80 young people in total. It is acknowledged by all that the reasons why the project was halted are that it created a huge financial burden on the CSB: in the region of 15 million dollars over the main three years of operation. There is quite possibly a need to further investigate such alternative projects. It may be interesting when reviewing the achievements of initiatives such as the Anischechistinhimaachewin project to query whether in fact the benefits of the programme were due to the teaching of Cree cultural traditions and skills or whether the benefits observed arose solely from the fact that young people with behavioural issues were placed within a wilderness setting. There have been several studies carried out in relation to such “outbound” projects and many Adventure Based Counselling (ABC) initiatives have been recorded the world over (Sternberg, 1997; Fletcher & Hinkle, 2002); theories of “real world problem solving” are also well documented (Nagel, 2001).

Parental support and attitudes

It is suggested by most interviewees that parental support is weak towards the school and education in general and that parents may have conflicting expectations with respect to the education they desire for their children. This may be due to the impact of the residential schools and to their own upbringing within that context; many feel that the scars of these experiences can still be felt in the distrust displayed by many parents (Bonspiel, 2006). However, it was also pointed out by some interviewees that the latest wave of parents are parents who were educated within the existing CSB and did not experience the residential school setting. The conflicting attitude of certain parents may therefore have other causes and many interviewees echoed the theories of Morantz (2002) and Scott (2002), according to whom forced settlement has led to profound social, economic and political divisions amongst communities and to a feeling of uncertainty with regards to values and goals. Further work is needed to quantify the attitudes of Cree parents towards the education process and to assess the impact on preconceptions and expectations on parental support, child attendance and child performance and behaviour in class.

Implicating students

It was felt by several interviewees that poor performance figures could be explained by the failure on the parts of teachers and schools to motivate students to remain in education until the end of secondary. There seems indeed to be little incentive for students to finish secondary education unless it is to move on to higher education, which is only offered in the south and amounts to an unavoidable departure from communities and families. Although an interviewee pointed out that a first year of CEGEP (two or three year post secondary collegiate studies) had been started at the Voyageur High School in 2006, there seemed little evidence of either the feasibility of running this

programme or the desire to extend it further to create a real collegiate programme offered within the communities. The resilience of students in higher education in the south has been a cause for concern for some time and it is generally felt by interviewees that Cree students are neither academically equipped nor emotionally prepared for some of the challenges that await them in these institutions. There have been considerable efforts to assist Cree students in this transition and the Cree Pathway pilot programme, run in collaboration with the Aboriginal Student Resource Centre, aims to smooth out this adaptation process (Bonspiel, 2006). Many interviewees point out that in spite of these initiatives, the percentage of college students who return home without completing their program of studies is extremely high.

The School Board needs to rapidly develop a curriculum that would address and sanction the acquisition of skills that reflected a more artistic or kinaesthetic intelligence. It is also difficult when speaking to non-native administrators and teachers within the CSB not to feel there still persists a level of ethnocentrism in notions and concepts of “failure”. The phenomenon of teenage resilience beyond the turmoil of adolescence and eventual exclusion increasingly attracts attention from researchers (Ungar, 2002) and this needs to be investigated further within the Cree context. Little evidence has been found to establish whether school failure and failure to find grounding and stability in the community in the long term can systematically be equated. Parallel studies in Inuit communities have shown that schools are not equipped to acknowledge and ease this individual process and that this leads to school failure though not maladjustment within the community (Matthiasson, 1979)

Absenteeism

It is estimated amongst interviewees that the average Cree student misses two full years of education out of the prescribed 11, through absenteeism. This seems in line with official figures (Cree School Board, 2006). Absenteeism in the early years of the Cree School Board was seen by many as caused by a lack of “fitness” between the traditional Western school calendar and the important seasonal events of Cree life. There is little doubt that in general absenteeism can often be sanctioned by parents (Visser, 2000) and Cree culture in this respect is no different. It is quite frequent, it would seem, to see families taking children out of school to take part in Goose hunting in the Fall. Even though the Ministry of Education school calendar has already been altered, with an early August start and a two week holiday for Goose Break in the spring, it is not unusual for parents to leave with their children for the hunting camps far earlier than the official date of the Goose break and for others to return much later, creating an obvious disruption in classroom activities and the learning process. This has led one Head of school interviewed to suggest that the problem is so great that it might perhaps be time to look towards initiatives started in native communities in the West of Canada whereby the year is cut into three terms and students only have a requirement to attend two terms of their choice, enabling them to pursue both traditional lifestyles and academic development. This is not an idea too dissimilar to the original concept of summer missionary schools offering concentrated periods of schooling seasonally (Gnarowski, 2002).

It was argued by many non-native interviewees that the traditional bush events could no longer be seen as the cause for absenteeism as many children now chose not to follow families to the hunting camps. It is noted by many that more and more adolescents for example can be seen in the communities over the Goose break, left to their own devices and that many are unwilling to leave for the bush for extended periods of time. A consultant stated that it is not rare for children to now however follow their families into the cities on school days or during school time, regardless of the effect this may have on their performance. Some will argue that even if the pursuits are no longer bush related this tendency illustrates the Cree rejection of sedentary lifestyles discussed in existing literature. Whatever the cause it is quite clear that with respect to absenteeism, prevention is far better than cure (Visser, 2000). Respondents however observed that sanctions were the main tool of intervention at school level.

Research on the children of “travellers” in Europe, while it offers an interesting parallel on the impact of absenteeism on performance, yields few tools that may be of use in this particular context. Many of the recommendation now indeed focus on the introduction of IT distance learning tools which would not be easily adaptable to the huge wilderness that the Cree nations still represent. Western models against truancy such as that devised by Cole, Visser and Daniels (2001) stress that any effective intervention in this area will presuppose, rather than the rigid imposition of rules and practices, a dialogue and discussion on practices within the systemic institutions that are schools. This proactive dialogue is perhaps still missing from many of the schools within the CSB and it may represent a rich field for further eco-systemic research.

Discussion

The work of the CSB, particularly the reflection occurring within the Pedagogical Services department, shows a determination, in the face of poor performance and exacerbated behavioural difficulties, to look beyond the dynamics of the classroom to various and wide ranging causes that may be at play in the symptoms observed. This deeply seated eco-systemic process proves quickly indispensable when confronted with drop out rates and low performance statistics of such proportion. Yet when one considers the very classroom symptoms reported by teachers within the CSB as problematic, it is clear that these are not specific to the Cree classroom environment: excessive movement in class, disregard for classroom etiquette, absenteeism, antagonism and oppositional defiance with teachers. This reflection, carried out within the exceptionally clear parameters of a geographically and culturally distinct environment and over such a short history, on the failures of a system and the need to adapt it further to cater for students at risk, may be of great significance and direct relevance to any educator seeking to understand the causes that lead to an increase in Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBDs) within the mainstream classrooms of western schools. The reviews and hypotheses put forward by the CSB, over its short history, have the great virtue of never falling back on the medical model hypotheses which are so frequently relied and a willingness to look beyond “within child” issues to analyse and comprehend behaviour and performance factors should trigger wider reflection in practitioners further a field.

Conclusion

At a time when the Cree nations are to benefit from the second part of the Paix des Braves settlement on the eve of the Rupert River financial settlement (Cadieux, 2005; Québec, 2006), it seems essential for the Cree School Board to initiate an assessment of its achievements and failures through its 25 year history. An eco-systemic understanding of the impact of family structure as well as social and historical factors has been much in evidence already through its history. What is perhaps missing is a desire to take those observations to their logical conclusions and to dare question certain features that have to date been retained as given parameters: retention of the predominance of English and French as first languages in the later years of secondary education; the expectations that a progress beyond secondary can only be achieved in non-native institutions; a willingness to accept traditional western teaching programmes as an adequate and adapted source of not just teachers but also teaching formats; and finally definition of educational failure or success that are mere carbon copies of those notions in other educational systems. As Niezen (1998) observes, the effort of Cree to

“incorporate formal administrations into a culture that identifies closely with a quintessentially informal forest economy”

may not be as contradictory as it appears at first. The Cree, remarks Thistle (1978), have for centuries assimilated western technology and certain institutional features without this necessarily amounting to cultural decline as they are accepted *“devoid of their European ideological content and assigned Indian meanings”* (p.35). Niezen (1998) remarks further that

“the development of Cree administrations based on southern models does not in itself mean that their values, goals and strategies will be the same as those of parent organisations in non-native societies” (p.5).

Perhaps here lies much of the current difficulties and uncertainty: the Cree may be deep in the complex process of developing a new model of school administration and curriculum, while non-natives have assumed for too long that the Cree School Board would simply reflect and implement notions and values of school boards elsewhere. The Québec Education Programme, with its wide ranging reassessment of the goals of education and its focus on skills acquisition rather than content, certainly comes at an apt conjuncture to offer the Cree School Board the context within which to perhaps rethink those parameters in the curriculum review it has just initiated. In spite of the geographical and cultural idiosyncrasies of its context, the CSB may find that this process is actually very similar to the one which is beginning to be undertaken the world over in order to adapt the aging and ill adapted curriculum to a world that has left far behind the Victorian social and economic imperatives that were once the basis for its conception.

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